



TAKING FASHION RISKS

Still wearing those practical court shoes your mum recommended? Can't decide which pair of navy trousers to wear to the office today? It's time you stepped out of your comfort zone and took a little gamble on fashion. By Cathrin Schaer

If you are the sort of person who wears 20 per cent of your wardrobe 80 per cent of the time, then it's highly likely you are stuck in a fashion rut. In fact, you may have become a prisoner in your own comfort zone without even realising.

Most of us dress for safety's sake rather than for what fashion is all about: fun, flamboyance, glamour, sex appeal and, well, to look interesting.

Happily there's light at the end of this baggy, beige tunnel and it's not the glare of an extreme makeover. Even if you're only after a vague change, the following escape plan will encourage you to take small steps toward true fashion freedom.

Get some inspiration

While it's not cool to copy there's nothing against stealing a little style from your favourite celebrity. We like to think of it as aspiration rather than emulation.

Stars such as Sarah Jessica Parker, Chloë Sevigny, Kate Moss, Sienna Miller and even Paris Hilton are all popular choices for the modern gal. Then again, you might prefer a look that is a little more classic, such as Audrey Hepburn, or take inspiration from Lauren Bacall with her classic white shirts and trousers.

When it comes to fashion inspiration look far and wide – music videos, television shows, movies and the art world are all good places to start. Or your style icon could be far closer than you think. If

you really admire the way a well-groomed friend or colleague dresses, then maybe it's time to take a closer look and dissect exactly what they are doing. All the while think emulate, not plagiarise.

It's about becoming inspired by clothes and how you enjoy seeing them worn. It's about deciding how you would like to express your personality, your desires, even your fantasies, through your clothes. Because everyone has a fantasy wardrobe or outfit, the kind of thing they'd wear if only they had enough time, money, energy, a model's body, a personal stylist and an army of designers at their beck and call.

While it may not be practical to live in our fantasy fashion world there is nothing stopping us from dipping into other

people's worlds and enjoying a little of their look from time to time.

Get some information

Once you've figured out what you like, you'll need to work out where to go shopping. Local fashion magazines are a great place to start because they show what's available here, rather than what's in the Prada store in Sydney.

And yes, it is true that fashion can be expensive. But it's also true that many local chain stores will be taking looks straight off the runways or off celebrity backs, translating them onto their shelves and carrying a much lower price tag.

This is probably also a good time to consider whether you're after a fashion look or a more classic style. Generally, if it's something that you can't imagine wearing for more than one season, don't buy 15 of them or spend several thousand dollars. But if it's something that will keep for a few years, it may be worth investing in the best fabric and cut you can find.

And if you're about to say that you know what you like, always have, and you definitely don't want to become a fashion victim, then answer this simple question: Have you looked around lately? Because there's so much more choice out there.

The emphasis is on freedom of expression, flattering your shape and developing your own personal style. As one American website puts it: "Remember a trend is really just a fashionable suggestion or direction, not a Supreme Court decision. Add your own good sense and taste to any style you adopt."

To find out what will work for you, you'll need to open your mind to all sorts of trends. For instance, wedge heels are in this season and maybe they'll suit you, giving you a bit of height while still being comfortable and pretty. Check those heels out. But, if you still don't like them, you get to reject them, too. The most important thing is that you tried a new look.

Get critical

When your high school sweetheart told you that hairstyle suited you, did you think he meant for it to last forever? Maybe it's time to reassess a little.

For instance, if your favourite colour has always been navy, ask yourself why. Maybe someone told you it made your eyes sparkle or that it was slimming. Ask

yourself what made you like it in the first place – and then, ask whether that reason is still a valid one.

The same goes for most other aspects of a stuck-in-the-comfort-zone wardrobe. Ask yourself why you've always thought

"A trend is really just a fashionable suggestion or direction, not a Supreme Court decision. Add your own good sense and taste to any style you adopt."

A-line skirts suit you. Do they still suit your looks, lifestyle, body type and personality? And if not, then the biggest question is, what's keeping you there, wearing navy blue A-line skirts and the same haircut you had in school? We think you'll find that the answer is "nothing".

Get some personal time

For many women, a list of commitments as long as a thigh-high platform boot comes well before any sort of fashion flamboyance. But lack of time doesn't mean looking good is not important.

Appearance is one of the ways that society judges us, and also how we judge ourselves. If you're stuck in a fashion rut wearing dull, dark colours, chances are that's a little bit how you'll feel, too. As Suzanne Fahey, who runs Wellington-based style consultancy Reveal Image tells it, "I had one client come to me because she was a size 16 and she wanted to update her style. She came back to me recently for a whole new wardrobe. Because she felt so good about herself after the first change, she ended up losing weight and now she's a size 10. This sort of thing can make a big difference to your self-confidence."

So if you're unhappy about being in a rut, the solution is to make time and effort and prioritise yourself for a change.

Get some advice

At this stage, you need some objective advice. You could pay for the services of a professional stylist or wardrobe consultant such as Fahey or you can ask a friend. There are a growing number of companies offering wardrobe advice. Quite often they will start their makeover with a colour consultation and this is when you'll get unbiased advice on which colours

suit you best. "Colour consultations are particularly important as you get older," explains Jackie O'Fee, director of Signature Style in Auckland, "because the right colours will make you look fresher and younger."

Style consultants will also do things such as audit your wardrobe and measure up your body in order to assess what styles of clothing will suit you best.

Your other option is to ask a friend, but make sure this person is a close and trusted confidant. Tell them you don't want compliments, you want a truthful assessment of what suits you and what doesn't. If they're a good friend you should get an honest opinion. "Of course only ever shop with a friend whose style you like," Fahey adds, "because people tend to dress you in what they like."

Get real about your shape

Several years ago you may have decided that all you ever wanted to wear was high-waisted jeans because they really suited you. But look around, times have changed. For one thing, it's highly likely your figure has changed and you may need to adjust your wardrobe to suit. For another thing, there are certain fashionable shapes that will look much better on you if you'd only give them a try.

"Some people really stick to what they think suits them," Fahey says. "For example, they might be wearing unflattering trousers that are outdated. When I suggest alternatives, they won't be sure but when I take them out and get them to try on a more modern style, they are immediately impressed with how much better they look. In the past, some clients have told me that they just don't suit skirts. But what they really mean is they don't suit a certain style of skirt. You need to try on lots of different styles to see what really works for you."

Do the opposite

Instead of going to the boutiques and stores you normally frequent, go

elsewhere. Once there, think about all those things you said you'd never do when it came to fashion, such as, "I would never wear pink"; "I would never go into that fancy boutique"; "I would never wear tight jeans". In fact make a list of those "never-woulds" and do the opposite. As O'Fee puts it, "I tell people to scare themselves." Make yourself try on something pink and some tight jeans. Make yourself spend at least half an hour in that fancy boutique admiring the clothes and ignoring the intimidating shop girls. You'll never feel the same about changing rooms again because there is absolutely no harm in trying something interesting and completely different to the everyday-you, while in the store. In the end, you might decide you were absolutely right – you do look terrible in pink and tight jeans will never suit you. But at least you gave it a try. And chances are, along the way you will definitely discover something new that really suits you. Hopefully along the way you will have had fun with clothes and have broken out of that fashion rut – even just a little.

Get a feeling

While trying on those more adventurous garments, you'll no doubt be asking for second opinions from the friend you took along.

But the most important opinion is your own. "I tell my clients to trust their instincts," Fahey says, "only they will instinctively know if they're ever actually going to wear this look."

Look in the mirror. How do you feel? Daring? Sexy? Glamorous? Pretty? If the answer to any of the above is yes, then the next step is to get practical. Will you wear this garment or accessory with other clothes you already own? Does it go with your lifestyle and does it suit your personality? If the answer to any of the above is a firm "No", then take it off,

step away and move onto the next item. If you feel forced into something, it will just hang at the back of your wardrobe. But if there's something that connects with your dreams, then head for the check out.

Breakout

Some of us are not just trapped in our comfort zones, sometimes we're also



LAUREN BACALL



CHLOË SEVIGNY



AUDREY HEPBURN



KATE MOSS

RUT BUSTERS

- Bold accessories. Try some craft-style chunky necklaces, which are big for Spring, with a plain top.
- A new pair of shoes, such as wedges, or some boots.
- Something sparkly.
- Wear one brighter colour or a print somewhere (even if it's just a scarf). Florals and ethnic prints are big news this season.
- Style your hair a little differently.
- Get a quick, inexpensive fashion fix at a chain or vintage store.
- Try a new lip colour.
- Change your signature scent.
- Switch handbags.

trapped by the roles we believe we have to play: wife, mother, accountant, lawyer.

"I'm into multi-purpose," says Fahey, who's a mother herself. She explains, "I've got a fetish for A-line skirts with a bit of tulle poking out or some embroidery. But I'll wear them with flat shoes and a plain top. The skirt is glamorous but I'm also totally comfortable. I'll go to work wearing that and then pick the kids up from school. And this isn't only about how I feel about myself, it's also about how other people treat me when I'm wearing those clothes."

So yes, you may be the responsible mother of two but you could also be that rock'n'roll girl in the tight jeans and cool

shoes or the sophisticate in a skirt with trendy detailing. Because it's all about dressing up – fashion allows us to show a different side to our personalities.

Work up to it

Having said all of this, no one is advocating that you start prancing around town dressed like a fairy princess with the kids in tow – or even, head to toe, in the sort of bohemian outfit Sienna Miller would wear. The best way to get adventurous with fashion is to start slowly. If you like Miller's style, then just choose one easy-to-wear element of it. For instance, try a pair of vintage boots with your jeans or maybe wear chandelier earrings next time you're out for the evening. Start off with the smaller, less expensive stuff. As you become more confident about what you like, you may graduate to larger items – a whole Bohemian-style dress with those vintage boots, perhaps – and you'll also be prepared to spend more on the item because you know you'll wear it.



SIENNA MILLER

Happy ever after

We're not saying that you need to ditch all your ideas about dressing.

If someone told you that green frock made your eyes sparkle, they were probably right. Stick with the green frock. "You should stick to what suits you," O'Fee explains. "But don't get stuck. You should keep refreshing yourself, too. It's just like having a dramatic hair cut – people will look at you differently and you will feel different."

What this process is about is simply re-evaluating those preconceptions you have. It's about opening up and giving today's fashion a chance. Explore and evolve. Because maybe your bum isn't quite so big any more (maybe it never was!). Maybe the newer style of hipster jean will suit you. Maybe you don't like blue because of your school uniform 10 years ago. Maybe you'd look fabulous with a pink silk blouse under your black jacket. Guess what? There's only one way to find out.